

**AGE GRADE SYSTEM IN AVUVU, IKEDURU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, IMO
STATE , 1964-1974.**

BY

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APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents who has continued to sponsor and support my academic journey as a student. They gave every necessary resources needed; in sacrifices, in words of encouragement, in prayers, and in financial support. May God bless them both and increase them on every side.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the age grade system in Avuvu community, Ikeduru Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria, 1964–1974. It investigates the structure, formation, functions, and evolution of age grades as indigenous institutions of social organization, focusing on their roles in governance, social control, cultural preservation, and post-war reconstruction following the Nigerian Biafra war (1967–1970). The study employs a historical methodology, drawing on oral interviews with elders, traditional leaders, and culture custodians in Avuvu, alongside archival materials from the National Archives Enugu (NAE) and relevant secondary sources. Findings show age grades served as the backbone of Avuvu's social organization, mobilizing labor for community projects such as road construction, market maintenance, and school building; enforcing social norms and resolving disputes; preserving cultural traditions through festivals and ceremonies; and coordinating post-war reconstruction. The research documents the impact of colonialism, Christianity, Western education, urbanization, and migration on the age grade system, demonstrating its resilience and adaptability. The reappearance of the Ekeala mask in 1974 symbolized the restoration of communal identity after the disruptions of war. The study argues that age grades are a vital indigenous institution that has navigated tradition and modernity, contributing to African social history and providing a historical record for Avuvu and future generations.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Age grades, system of social organization which refer to formal relationships, values, norms and institutions through which a community of people have a sense of shared identity and organize themselves through which people structure social interactions and organize a people. This structure includes among the African peoples in which there is system of ages, rights of initiation, shared roles and forms of government which define the patterns of life.¹ They serve to promote social solidarity and regulate behavior. Age group organizations have several characteristic features that form basic and important parts of African Social structure. These features include their formal structure of ages, their emphasis on rights of initiation and on community role and obligations and the presence of various traditional institutions.

Also, Igbo society's age grades system and social organization have for long served in determining relationships within communities and in structuring social progress of communities. The system operates on local knowledge, transmitted in stories, rituals, proverbs, ceremonies and group activities. Through age grade and social organization systems, one can acquire certain codes of social conducts and develop attitudes towards other community members.² By these and group membership and interaction within community age grade, solidarity in community life is attained, thus ensures social existence and continuance.

Social organization and structures in Avuvu community, Ikeduru L.G.A, Imo State have an intertwining relationship with their systems of indigenous religions and their symbolisms of indigenous political power. Among many of the important oral traditions recorded during the study era (1964-1974) relating to this project was that of the worship of the sacred Ekeala mask. This Ekeala mask, to be looked after by the Dibia of that age for the spiritual protection of community members was considered a spiritual institution.³

The scholars of Igbo society had already highlighted that social organization is held by means of indigenous institutions such as family, lineage groups, village assemblies, religious groups, title-societies and age-grades.⁴ Thus, according to Uchendu age-grades is one of the most influential

means of social control in traditional Igbo society and also provides the foundation of communal administration in addition to allowing individuals to become active participants in communal politics, develop leadership skills and act collectively.

In the same vein, Afigbo attributes other functions to age-grade societies; among which are the maintenance of law and order, the organizing of collective labor, the enforcement of community policies and the sustenance of communal solidarity. The association was sometimes responsible for the construction of roads, market squares, public halls etc., and for the inculcation of norms and culture into members from one generation to another. The institution thus occupied a place of consequence in the socio-political structure of many of the Igbo communities.⁵

In Avuvu, as in most other parts of the Igbo culture area, communal living and collective responsibility are part of their way of life. The age grades have traditionally played the role of vehicle of community development and conflict settlement and also a cultural preserver of customs and traditions of Avuvu as well as for co-coordinating community activities (see above, age groups and functions).⁶ These diverse and different sets of age groups among the community serve as the glue holding society together and mobilizing its members for communal development, feasting, keeping public places and generally ensuring that the laid down laws and norms of society are being respected by the people. Age grades may have suffered due to

colonization, Christianity, Western education and modern life style; however, these age-grade groups have sustained and maintained an honored status in the society.⁷ Although in the long run the age grade system and the social organization of the Igbo society like Avuvu have been changed under colonial and western contact (Christianity, Western type education, modernization, and so on) nevertheless the significance of traditional institutions as revealed by the myth of Ekeala as is pointed out and emphasized in my narrative remains the cultural and moral value in Igbo society.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Age grade systems and the organization of the society historically, contributed immensely to the administration of Avuvu in Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State, the culture of the society and its conservation, social order in the community as well as in the development of

Avuvu and its people. Although these institution's significance in the traditional society is obvious, studies with comprehensive and systematic documentation of the age grade systems and the organization of society have hitherto been scant for Avuvu, most especially, in 1964 and 1974. Most studies on age grades, in fact on Igbo society organization, tend to cover the entire Igbo society at the expense of a localized context as Avuvu, or as if such institutions functioned uniformly.

The Nigerian Biafran War and its immediate post-war period were marked by considerable socio-political upheavals and social changes, as well as the modification of many aspects of traditional institutions in Igboland. In addition to the general crisis of change, the Biafran War to the distortion and often erosion of many of the traditional institutions in Igboland, with particular consequences for traditional authority structures as well as social organizations like age-grade systems. Historical sources about the effect of these changes on the pattern, organization, scope, and function of age-grade and socio-organizational associations in Avuvu are relatively scarce. Similarly, there is a dearth of materials which directly addressed the role of age-grade associations in promoting community development, conflict mediation and settlement, maintenance of social order, cultural preservation and promotion of social cohesiveness in Avuvu during this time frame.

The lack of such in-depth research has left lacunae in our understanding of the socio-organizational history of Avuvu, as well as of the position and importance of the age grade system in keeping communities cohesive and functioning through processes of social transformation and change. Hence this study intends to contribute towards understanding the system in terms of its: form, functions, difficulties and importance in the community of Avuvu in 1964 to 1974.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This research is aimed at investigating the age grade system and social organization in Avuvu Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State from 1964 – 1974. To achieve the objectives of this research are: to;

- i. Trace the historical background of Avuvu.

- ii. Identify the structure and functions of age grades in Avuvu.
- iii. Examine changes in the age grade system and social organization between 1964 and 1974.
- iv. Assess the impact of social change, including colonial legacy, Christianity, and the Biafran War experience, on age grades and social organization.
- v. Analyze the role of indigenous institutions such as the Ekeala mask tradition in shaping communal identity and social order in Avuvu.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the paper seeks to complement the literature on African social history by having as its central object of study the age grade system and social organization in Avuvu during 1964–74. This thesis will hopefully deepen our knowledge of how the age grade system can serve as a tool of social control, as an avenue for individual or group identity construction, for collective action towards development and for cultural conservation in traditional Igbo society. The study can also serve to shed more light on discussions of the adaptability, the disruption or persistence of local institutions in the context of social-political turmoil, especially the era of Nigerian Biafra War.

Also, the essay uses the Ekeala mask oral tradition narrative to analyze the dynamic relationship between indigenous religion and the political organization of society. It illustrates how such religious institutions as divinities and rituals in pre-colonial Avuvu served to support communal moral life, legitimate leadership and preserve the community from disintegration.

The research is practically important for policy makers, cultural bodies, individuals, citizens of Avuvu, Ikeduru and the entire state in that it informs us on the values attached in preserving age grade institution and other indigenous social institutions, cultures and symbols as assets for communal identity. For individuals, it serves as a recorded repository and the only means for transmitting to the next generation the unique way in which their society is structured and cultural traits found. More importantly, it informs on how to formulate cultural policy and implement strategies for community development.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on age grade system in avuvu,ikeduru LGA of imo stsate between 1964-1974.

The choice of the 1964 was as a result of the complex and multi faced political crisis that culminated to the Nigerian/ Biafra war. The terminating year 1974 was selected because it was a year of the post war rehabilitation and social reconstruction of the community. Moreover, it was also the year the Ekeala mask reappeared which represented the tenacity and stability of local institutions even after the ravages of war and social changes.

1.6 Research Methodology and Sources of Data

Historical method involving primary, secondary and tertiary sources (internet-based sources) will be employed in the historical context on Avuvu with reference to age grade system and social organization in Avuvu from 1964-1974.

The materials that formed the basis of this research comprise oral interviews and documentary sources (archival). In Avuvu, Ikeduru Local Government Area, Interviews were held with old people, traditional leaders and custodian of culture, men of experience, etc. and it was from this interview that I was able to acquire reliable historical, social as well as functional details about the organization of the Avuvu people. How age grade worked, the historical significance attached to the disappearing and reappearing of the mask of the mask known as 'Ekeala'. I made sure that all I gathered were verified and consistent.

Finally, available archival materials were used to supplement and cross-check findings gathered through oral interviews. The archival sources were a variety of sources such as, government documents, administrative reports, and censuses, intelligence documents and correspondence etcetera where documents were accessed through existing archival sources and archives.

Secondary Sources books, journal articles and other learned sources with particular references to Igbo social institutions, indigenous religion and African traditional governments. The aim here is to situate the study within the academia which tends to cover more on what might be contained as what has transpired concerning age grade system; its rise under colonialism; Christianity; modernization and impact.

These traditions in combination with archival research offer the researcher a means to examine the historical and socio-cultural processes during the time period in Avuvu and to analyze those events in an equitable way.

1.7 Literature Review

This section therefore attempts at reviewing literature in the field of age grade system and social organization among Igbo society and traditional African society and particularly focus on indigenous institution at operation in their respective historical setting in Avuvu, Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State (1964-1974).

S. Ezeanyika, "Leadership Succession and Traditional Societies in the Global South"⁸ examines how traditional institutions of leadership succession have been reinterpreted and accommodated in the face of colonialism and contemporary political regimes across Africa in the post-colonial era. The paper reveals that traditional forms of leadership and social organization, including age grades, continue to function as vital links between modern government and community life, promoting order, peace, and social cohesion. The study is relevant in understanding how indigenous institutions adapt to changing political conditions. However, it did not examine the age grade system in Avuvu, Ikeduru Local Government Area, particularly during the 1964–1974 period, which the present study intends to address.

O.C. Chidiobi and J.C. Ibekwe's "Oil Exploitation and Resource Curse in the Niger Delta Region"⁹ examines the post-colonial impact of oil exploitation on the socioeconomic status and environment of resource-dependent communities. The paper reveals that oil exploration adversely affected the environment, created economic disparity, and caused social dislocation, leading to changes in the pattern of age grade organization and relationships among the affected communities. The study is relevant in demonstrating how external economic forces can alter the structure of indigenous social organizations. However, it did not examine the age grade system and social organization in Avuvu during the period of the Nigerian Civil War, 1964–1974, a gap which this study addresses.

E. Kanu in "Environmental Injustice and Decolonial Nonrecognition"¹⁰ discusses the historical and recent experiences of host communities in southeastern Nigeria using the concepts of

environmental injustice and post-colonial subjugation. The paper reveals that despite social marginalization and environmental damage, host communities maintained elements of their social organization, particularly age-grade groups, which helped them resist further erosion of their identity. The study is relevant in demonstrating the resilience of indigenous institutions under adverse conditions similar to those faced by Avuvu community. However, the work is framed broadly around environmental and political considerations rather than age grade system.

K.O. Patrick et al "Aspects of Onomastics in Ngwa Igbo"¹¹ examines naming conventions among the Ngwa people as a mirror of social organization and identity formation. The paper reveals that Igbo names carry cultural significance reflecting the circumstances of birth, family aspirations, religious conviction, and socio-political conditions, and that western education, Christianity, and modernization have altered these naming patterns over time. The study is relevant in showing how social organization is expressed through cultural practice during a period of transition. However, it focuses on nomenclature rather than the age grade system.

P.O. Mbah and V.C. Obiagu's "Community Development and Government Council in Imo State"¹² analyzes the role of community government councils in mobilizing local resources and promoting participation and grassroots development in Imo State. The paper reveals that, despite challenges such as political interference and inadequate funding, these councils have served as an important basis for communal organization and governance. The study is relevant in understanding the wider structures of communal governance within which age grades operate. However, it did not discuss the age grade system as an institution of communal governance which the present study addresses.

L. Amadi and J.E. Agena's "Globalization, Culture Mutation and New Identity"¹³ discusses the effects of globalization on African cultural identity, with particular reference to Igbo society in Nigeria. The paper reveals that traditional institutions, including age grades, have been reshaped and reorganized under western influence, producing a hybrid culture in which some cultural elements endure while others are modified. The study is relevant in understanding the broader forces of change affecting institutions such as age grades. However, its scope is wide and conceptual, without specific detail on any particular locality, a gap which this study, being a locality-specific case study, addresses.

A.A. Sunday and N.J. Oluoha's "Community Participation and Rural Development in Imo State"¹⁴ examines the involvement of local people in rural development projects in Imo State. The paper reveals that community involvement makes development projects more effective and durable, and that traditional institutions such as age grades are useful in gathering and organizing people for such projects. The study is relevant in recognizing the continued importance of age grades in communal mobilization during the 1964–1974 period. However, its emphasis is on rural development and community participation rather than on chronicling and analyzing the age grade system and social organization in Avuvu, a gap this study addresses.

U. Ugwuala and U. Ucheoma's "Political Violence and Socio-Economic Development in Imo State"¹⁵ analyzes the impact of political instability on socio-political development in Imo State. The paper reveals that political violence erodes aspects of the social structure, including the age grade system, and disintegrates other community institutions, with negative consequences for social cohesion. The study is relevant in showing how the political turmoil of the 1964–1974 period, including the Nigerian Civil War, affected traditional institutions in Imo State. However, its focus is political and economic, rather than the age grade system and its socio-cultural organization in Avuvu specifically, a gap the present study addresses.

F.O. Elomba's "Promoting the Igbo Language and Culture"¹⁶ discusses the role of language as an instrument for promoting and maintaining Igbo culture. The paper reveals that language is important for perpetuating institutions such as the age grade system, but that this role is threatened by the influence of external languages and globalization, making its active promotion through media and formal education necessary. The study is relevant in highlighting the cultural pressures facing indigenous institutions during 1964–1974. However, it focuses solely on language as a vehicle of cultural transmission rather than on the age grade system and the wider society, a gap which the current study, focused on Avuvu, addresses.

From the reviewed works, it is evident that although scholars have written extensively on Igbo society, post-colonial transformation, and institution building, none has specifically examined the age grade system and social organization in Avuvu, Ikeduru Local Government Area, during 1964–1974. These works offer useful background on themes such as governance, language, globalization, and development, but do not provide a thorough understanding of the organization,

operation, and changes in the age grade system in Avuvu during this period. This study therefore provides that comprehensive analysis through a micro-historical lens.

1.8 Organization of the Study

The present study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one consists of the introduction to the study and encompasses: background to the study, statement of the problem, aim and objectives of the study, significance of the study, scope of the study, methodology and sources of data, review of relevant literature and arrangement of work.

This second chapter deals with the geographical history of Avuvu. Geographical features and characteristics, genesis traditions and the Avuvu people, the Avuvu social and political system, and the genesis and development of Avuvu's age grade system are also covered.

The third chapter analyzes the age grade system and social organization of the Avuvu people, 1964 - 1969. The topic is covered as follows; Structure and development of age grades; Functions of age grades in the development of the community; Age grades in the management of social control and discipline; Age grade - colonial administration relationship; The place of Christian religion and western education in the age grades.

Chapter four (Age grade system in Avuvu 1969–1974) examines changes in the age grade system of the people of Avuvu after colonialism; uses of age grade in modern Avuvu; uses of age grade on community development projects; age grades, urbanization, and migration and age grades and modern education.

Chapter Five in the end concludes the research and gives an answer to research question.

ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Geographical Location and Physical Features of Avuvu

Avuvu is one of the autonomous communities in Ikeduru LGA of Imo state of southeast Nigeria. It is a rural community composed of a predominating number of indigenous Igbo tribe with similar linguistic culture, historical background, shared cultural practice, traditions of other similar villages within same region of Southeastern Nigeria. Geographically Avuvu is located in tropical rain forest belt of Southeastern Nigeria which is blessed with very fertile soil and good Rainfall throughout most of the year, a condition that has had significant effect on the economic activity and structure of the settlement which largely consist of agriculture, trade and traditional craftsmanship within the environment.¹

The physiography of Avuvu comprises relatively undulating plains, lowlands and few rising grounds that lend themselves to farming and habitation. There is abundant fertile land capable of producing crops such as yam, cassava, cocoyam, maize, and vegetables that sustain agriculture as the peoples' chief occupation. The peoples' mode of livelihood is a resultant product of its climatic condition having a two-season regime characterized by rain and dry seasons. Water bodies like streams and natural drainage systems have formed an important physiographical aspect of Avuvu to support both daily human use and economic pursuits. Orammiriukwa river traversing through Ugirike-Okwu-Amakohia Avuvu road has been of immeasurable value to the economic well-being of Avuvu. These streams and rivers also traditionally serve to mark the boundary of different communities in the area.²

A significant physical problem of Avuvu is gully erosion, which is threatening roads, farmlands and settlement areas. This is attributed to human interference with the physical environment (clearing forests, building inadequate drainages and unchecked structures). However, in spite of the challenges posed by environmental issues in Avuvu community, indigenes and community leaders of Avuvu are in place to sustain traditional practice of environmental protection and community labor. Housing in the Avuvu community is communal in pattern as with the traditional Igbo social setting with compounds organized according to the system of kindred groups and extended family with the view of fostering collaborative labor for agricultural and ceremony.³ Vegetation and forest resources have contributed traditionally towards local

medicine, building and indigenous occupation. The forest cover of Avuvu community has been dwindling due to population explosion over the years. In all, location and landforms have been significant influences on the social development, economy and political history of the Avuvu community, with the interplay of geography and human effort.⁴

2.2 Historical Background of Avuvu

One of the indigenous communities in the Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria, Avuvu, is one such example of a community with a compelling history of origin. These oral histories of how the people of Avuvu began have become inextricably linked to the entire culture and history of Avuvu. The origin of the Avuvu people is primarily recounted through oral stories passed down through oral generations. The origins of these histories date back to ancient Igbo history and speak to the people that established Avuvu many years prior to any written documentation that existed. History is a common topic of oral tradition throughout Avuvu society and primarily discusses aspects such as the unity of the people, the ancestry and settlement patterns, the formation of kinship ties and, most importantly, the origin of place and social organization. Oral traditions were thus utilized to ensure that there was a link maintained to all past Avuvu ancestry, history, and tradition.⁵

Local history narratives maintain that the pioneers of Avuvu, relocated from elsewhere in Igbo land during the period of early settlements and gradual migration which had taken over in the southeastern Nigeria in the search for land, peace and more suitable land to survive. Historical oral evidence posits that the migrating settlers chose the location because of fertile farmlands, streams and trees for agricultural purposes. Gradually, such villages grew into family compounds which later blossomed into the present-day community. The settlement was marked by frequent inter-group relations with adjacent settlements in Ikeduru and elsewhere in the process.⁶

Igbo origin, custom and traditions are apparent in the historical narratives of Avuvu. Igbo society has a reputation of common traditions, customs and ancestry throughout many southeastern Nigerian groups.⁷ The people, Avuvu, feel deeply tied to Igbo origins, language and social order, the ancestor's journeys to the promised land (promised) lands are associated with native religions, communal farming practices, cultural traditions and values that maintained their collective integrity over many years.

Avuvu falls within Ikeduru Local Government Area, an old administrative division situated at the west of Imo state. It became part of what constitute the old Imo state as a separate administrative unit during the colonial era under British colonial rule that restructured local governance across southeastern Nigeria. There are vital records, housed at the Nigerian National Archives in Enugu, within the files of Owerri Provincial Office spanning from 1907 to 1956 that throw light into the administrative practices in different communities in the Owerri Province which includes Ikeduru area.⁸ This was with the introduction of warrant chiefs and Native court in the colonial system, which brought changes to the already political organization of the Avuvu society, and the people have to contend with new system of rule. It however did not change many elements of traditional political systems, and as such the Avuvu maintained traditional political structures, such as the age grade, titled society and the position of the elders.

As in much of pre-colonial Igbo society Avuvu consisted of numerous autonomous villages that were administered by their respective elders' assemblies, age-set groupings, and other established indigenous institutions, since there was no overall, central government, but rather an decentralized form of participatory rule.⁹ Age-set organizations were an important component of the system of administration in the village, of labor procurement and the regulation of public affairs, thus facilitating such activities as the organization of communal undertakings, the adjudication of disputes, the celebration of festivals. This observation is echoed in Victor Uchendu's seminal account of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria where he refers to age-set organizations as instruments of communal life among the Igbo.¹⁰

The time of Nigerian independence in 1960 signaled an era of changes for communities such as Avuvu. Specifically, the years of 1964 and 1974-the period covered in this analysis-proved to be quite momentous, and perhaps the most distinguishing event during this era was the Nigerian Biafran War(1967-1970), often referred to as the Nigeria-Biafra War. The war resulted from the volatile political climate following the January and July 1966 military coups and the pogroms against Igbos in the Northern region of Nigeria, which led to the declaration of the Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967, by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.

The war lasted for thirty months, inflicting substantial damage to the social life of Igbo communities including Avuvu-by disorganizing social structures, creating refugees, suspending agriculture and commerce, and resulting in loss of life and property.

Biafra surrendered in January 1970, leading to the Federal Government's plan of "Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation." In the period following the war, members of Avuvu were active in rebuilding the community, particularly through their use of age grade associations and traditional organizations to mobilize the collective will of the community.¹¹ The strength and capacity of these indigenous institutions to withstand the pressures and effects of war thus underline their importance in the life of the community, and this is the larger context within which to consider their role in the social organization of Avuvu between 1964 and 1974.

The historical origin of Avuvu demonstrates that farming was also crucial in the nascent growth of the community. Apart from it being an economic venture, agriculture as an establishment in the society brings to the family together and village together. The rich farmland made permanent settlement possible leading to increase the population of the community. Yam and cassava came to stand for wealth and hard work as they brought about social status of individuals. Farming traditions also had associated festivals and other community efforts to form the way of social life. Through farming practices, they learnt the virtue of co-operation and sharing.¹²

Inter-Community relationships the other dimension of historical traditions Avuvu recorded was about the relationships they kept with the people of neighboring communities through marriage and trading. Through markets they established relationships with their people of neighboring villages in which there was economic activities exchange of various products of different areas and also marriage connections strengthened relationships and peace coexistence between communities of the people of the area. Conflicts sometimes occurred, regarding boundaries of the land, and political activities but still, the people in the traditional societies always resolved through elders' meetings or negotiation of inter-communities and maintained stability and peace.¹³

One can trace significant differences in the past Avuvu experience as a result of colonialism. With the arrival of British colonial power there were a series of developments including changes in traditional political structures, the introduction of western-style education, Christianity and

new forms of economy. Traditional belief and customs waned as Christianity came to dominate the community. However, a substantial amount of traditional origin stories and communal ideology continued to exist through storytelling and customary forms of living.¹⁴

Finally, then, the origin traditions of the Avuvu peoples highlight aspects of community history, especially important when a study cannot utilize written historical sources or is based on oral research. Among these peoples, the traditions of kinship organization, belief systems, religious practices, and communal traditions enabled the continuity of group identity over time, with migrations, settlement, the introduction of agriculture and intergroup relations all playing a part in forming the community. Although many aspects of traditional life had been impacted by colonialism, modernity, and changing social organization, many of these origins traditions of origin have continued to serve as an important cornerstone to understanding community identity.¹⁵

2.3 Political Activities

The political arrangement Avuvu is similar to the broader traditional arrangements in that the people are clustered in a structure typical of an Igbo people in south-east Nigeria, and for as long as there were no colonial impositions, the arrangement of the political arrangement rested on kinship ties, village councils, age sets, and a council of elders. Power was not to be concentrated in the hands of one political leader, but was spread amongst a multitude of other groups and political bodies, and to enhance political participation, and make all political bodies accountable. The political organization of the community is on consensus, kinship bonds, and other forms of shared morality that define governance among the people.¹⁶

Village Assembly as Political Organization The village assembly served as the axis of the political framework of Avuvu. Community meeting or gathering facilitated consultation on issues pertaining to well-being and progress of the people. This included discussions concerning the land disputes, common labor, security and festivity celebration of the people.

Usually, the elders and community members were used to direct discussion and orderliness, but general members were given the chance to voice out issues concerning the whole of the community.

This was indicative of the democratic principle's characteristic of the traditional political structure of the Igbo.¹⁷

Role of the Council of Elders in the Avuvu political system the council of elders held a position of immense prestige in the Avuvu political system. The elders were considered to be the keepers of custom, morals and the inherited wisdom of ancestors within the community. They made judgements in order to uphold peace and to keep in line with custom. The decrees of the council of elders carried considerable weight because age and experience were given weight in a society and also helped maintain tradition of previous generation with the present system.¹⁸

However, pre-colonial Avuvu leadership styles are also influenced by the indigenous political institutions that predate colonialism, where there were no hereditary rulers and leaders, but men rose to position of leadership by the test of individual worthiness and by wisdom, age, knowledge, and respect. Important individuals that possess the traits of probity, valor, courage, and care for communal good would most likely rise to prominence and leadership position. Autonomy systems which the indigenes enjoy recently led to the development of the existing structures of administration in the Ikeduru Local Government Area. It has been established in community development studies carried out in the Ikeduru Local Government area that: Traditional rulers as well as the union have been involved in the stimulation of development in their rural community and for a community to mobilize for communal action such as electrifying their community, road development in a community, communal work etc., is through their collective effort, etc.¹⁹

Religion likewise assisted determine Avuvu's political structuring, due to the fact that conventional religion was intrinsic to governance, conflict resolution, and ethics, as well as priests and guardians of shrines were considered influential due to their functions in politics, due to spiritual status. To maintain social stability as well as attain fairness amongst its customers, Avuvu made use of oaths, sacrifices, and also rites which terrified the population into respecting area laws and also political routines from the risk of super-natural retaliation, thus bolstering the power of its political bodies over the locals.²⁰

When colonialism came, this political system was dramatically reshaped by colonial indirect rule systems imposed by British colonial masters over indigenous political structures of many Igbo

communities. The establishment of warranted chiefs and colonial court system under the imposed system led to clashes with indigenous decentralized political system of Avuvu people. Taxation, western education, Christianity that also accompanied colonialism began to undermine some of the traditional political institutions.

However, due to the pervasiveness of the political culture in communal living, traditional systems have not completely withered away.

People continue to utilize elders, family, and communal systems for management of their localities, adjudication of disputes.²¹

Political activity in Avuvu was maintained also by systems of economic cooperation and communal labor activities that played important role in political administration. These included communal projects such as building roads, controlling erosion, etc. That required political coordination. The traditions of communal activity are even apparent in present-day community development works at the Ikeduru Local Government Area. Investigations in autonomous community systems have demonstrated that cooperation among members in the community has made substantial contribution to development infrastructure and social services.²²

Summary Overall Avuvu politics is governed by kinship, communal and participatory system. The indigenous institutions of village assembly, traditional religion, council of elders and age grade associations contributed to political order and stability. The forces of colonialism and modernization did alter the indigenous political landscape in Avuvu to some extent; however, many indigenous political institutions persist through adaptation and their continued survival helps us understand Avuvu in the general historical and political experience of the Ikeduru people in the Ikeduru Local Government Area.

2.4 Socio-Cultural Activities

Socio-cultural Activities The socio-cultural life in Avuvu consists of a web of customs, communal values and social institutions which have characterized the community in successive generations. Similar to communities in any segment of Igbo society in Southeastern Nigeria, Avuvu had in place a number of important institutions, collective practices, and social gatherings, that regulate life and give each individual community and people its identity. Such

activities are usually socio-functional in that they aim to regulate human interaction, and transmit shared values from generation to generation in addition to foster collective identity and social harmony amongst members. Of the many such social institution, important ones that need to be identified are marriage, religion, festival, age-grade system, among other practices in which their members can partake in Avuvu's community.²³

Marriage played an indispensable role in the cultural, social life of Avuvu. In essence it was viewed as a premier social institution in Avuvu society. Not only did it signify a marriage contract between an individual but an alliance between lineages and families. Moreover, the institution of marriage fostered extensive and binding social ties that linked families and strengthened the inter-familial bonds.²⁴

The customary marriage process among the Avuvu involved a specific sequence of cultural rituals typical of the communal life of society. These consisted of introductory visits, the negotiating process between families of the prospective couple, bride-price payment and celebration to signify family union. The bride price paid was considered respectful to the family of the girl and gave serious indication of the groom's family's intentions. Hence marriage ceremony was usually an important societal event bringing community together.²⁵

In Avuvu, polygyny occurred in some households and has implications in maintaining social status, expansion of labor and increasing population. Large family was generally perceived as indication of the economic prosperity and the influence a man commanded in the community. Women, as active members also had the potential of structuring society by involving in market organizations, engaging in the farming process, and being present at various social functions.

In spite of male dominance over political leadership, the female participants are equally influential in maintaining the community's economic productivity, household economy, and social equilibrium. Marriage organizations constituted the basic structures for community as a whole; social and economic arrangements of the society of Avuvu society.²⁶

Religion was one of the strongest factors to decide socio cultural life in Avuvu and to play significant impact on rule, social morality, identity as in community as a whole. It is evident that conventional system of belief that is based on cult for God, spirits of ancestors and mystic

powers in order to influence on matters in the earthly kingdom, where spirituality of the people is in connection with the normal social interaction.²⁷

Among respected community members we find those of a religious vocation: priests, keepers of shrines, and custodians of sacred sites. The former acted as conduits to the sacred powers, acting on behalf of communities; their role as intermediaries and leaders in the community cannot be overemphasized, and the pervasive links between governance and religion, dispute and justice, the observance of social practices and prayer were pervasive. The appeal of an oath, a sacrificial rite, and a public appeal to the divine are ubiquitous mechanisms for the regulation of life and for warding off supernatural vengeance. These forms of authority were crucial for holding together the moral order which underlay the structure of life within the community.²⁸

When Christianity arrived with colonialism in Avuvu, its introduction also brought new religious ethics, and over time changed aspects of indigenous religion in Avuvu. Missionary activities undermined the old spiritual traditions and beliefs and discouraged some of Avuvu's old rituals. Yet the people of Avuvu not only found it possible to live side by side, their faith, and belief as indigenous Avuvu's' people lived with Christianity. Hence at different historical time and places, Avuvu continued to maintain an ordering moral system, political structures and community sense.²⁹

The festivals played a major role in the socio-cultural life of Avuvu. They were occasions for the communal festivities, worship and reaffirmation of the group identity. Traditionally festivals afforded the community to come together to thank the gods, express their cultures, and revitalize social life and also to maintain good relationships among community members.³⁰

Most festivals at Avuvu have been timed to coincide with agricultural calendars, the veneration of the ancestors, the worship of community gods, etc. The festivals and community rituals in Avuvu involved all members of the community who in some ways also participate in the masquerade performance and group meals, singing and dancing which correspond to the traditional culture and heritage of the community. Important role was played by community assembly and elder-councils in organizing these festival activities and ensuring the maintenance of culture protocols; at some time, these functions include also the dissemination of decisions made in community assemblies or community conflicts are resolved.³¹

Another interesting facet of the festival life in Avuvu concerns the history of the Ekeala mask. A story widely reported among Avuvu elders covering the period of 1964–1974 has it that the Ekeala mask was lost after a succeeding priest performed an offensive act (a case of alleged profanation) which brought on a period of hiatus in the ritual and cultural life of the community. When it was subsequently recovered in 1974 and led to the inauguration of the Eke Ala Festival, it signaled a time of restoration of communal health and identity through communalism, with festival life becoming a key expression of shared cultural and spiritual belonging that preserved continuity.³²

The age grade was one of the most persistent and structurally important of the institutions that operated to form the cultural life of Avuvu. The age grade was essentially the grouping together of a class of people whose ages were close to each other, who belonged to specific age ranges and were formed into definite units that fulfilled specific roles within the communal sphere at given stages in their individual and collective lives. The age grade functioned to systematically train young people in communal life, building loyalty and collective spirit as well as discipline through their membership of social groups based on age.³³

In Avuvu the organization into age grades derived from the division into generation groups and degrees of social maturity; those individuals born at roughly the same time belonged to the same age grade and were initiated into a particular level at the same time and shared the same levels throughout their lives. Initiation was performed into age grades and represented formal membership into the age groups, a prerequisite for the acceptance of community obligations. Initiation involved teaching and the indoctrination into the mores and norms of Avuvu, hence, it also served as social maturation. Life as a member of an age grade generated enduring bonds of commitment, trust and mutual dependence.³⁴

There were roles attached to the different age grades. These roles help the development of the community and maintain order. In age grade system young men were in charge of physical work, building roads and streets clearing the bushes, sanitation of the markets, the community houses construction and the security of the community. Whereas the older age grades were more on the side of the council of elders, supervise and advisory duties, perform special ritual. Also serve as

social control in the community, where the members discipline offenders of the rules, order people during the gathering and give punishment to those who offend community values.³⁵

Also, the aspect of community development was one of the various functions age grades performed. Community members often carried out their work in collective group; work to develop and repair roads, markets, and bridges in the village. Age grade groups in Avuvu often had the habit of playfully competing against each other in development project to promote hard work and communal support. It was discovered through the study that this aspect of community development in Ikeduru Local Government Area has not been replaced by any in assisting to improve infrastructure and rural development.³⁶ Hence, the Age grade System of Avuvu had long-term positive impacts on both social and physical development of the community.

Colonial rule, the spread of Christianity, and the Nigerian Biafra War have in differing measure influenced the functioning of the age grades of Avuvu. Colonial policies and missions impacted on some aspects of traditional age grade practices, whereas the war, for a period, halted some of the group's activities and broke up social networks among people in some of the other Ikeduru LGA communities.³⁷ In the face of these challenges, however, age grade functioning proved quite resilient by modifying its focus in line with current realities in society; age grade meetings turned to community development meetings, while the educated members of Avuvu community could be involved in age grade activities in contributing towards the progress of their home-based community.

Therefore, socio-cultural institutions in Avuvu comprising the marriage system, the religious system, the age grade system and the system of festival cumulatively shaped the fabric of community living and social structure in the community. While each institution performed specific but mutually inclusive roles for a united society, for the transfer of the traditions and cultural values from one generation to another, to provide a moral framework for behavior and for the progress and development of the people, these traditions underwent certain modifications through the impact of Christianity and Colonialism and later the influence of modernization on the community and, nevertheless, endured and maintained their importance till now. The institutions have always been vital for the study of the community's history, its culture, and society and the entire experiences of the people of Avuvu as a people.

2.5 Economic Activities in Avuvu

In 1964–1974, the economy of Avuvu depended largely on utilization of the local environment and managed by community institutions. On top of that, Avuvu had well-endowed tropical rainforest soils, a great deal of river networks and the most conducive tropical climate, allowing different kinds of economic activities to take place such as, agricultural cultivation, processing of palm products, fishing activities, internal trade and artisanal works that provided income for the local households and community development that are controlled by the social institutions.³⁸

Agriculture was the life blood of Avuvu's economic life, its fertility producing cassava, yam, cocoyam, maize and various vegetables, the king of these being yam that was considered a symbol of success and wealth. Agriculture took on both individual and group (family and community) basis in the cycle of rain and drought; each cycle determining activities, whether it be planting, harvesting and socializing activities. It therefore represents not an economic activity in itself but a socio-cultural practice binding the community, generationally to generation. Production of palm produce and palm kernel were the other most important economic activities, due to the forest's abound palm trees where women process its kernel and oil into marketable goods for both the Ikeduru region and its surrounding markets especially during the dry seasons.³⁹

A supplemental economy was developed from fishing which utilized the abundant resources of the Orammiriukwa River. By setting fish traps, casting nets and fishing with hooks, especially during the dry season, the village produced fish to feed families and sell locally. Markets, most especially Eke market day was a major center of commerce and social interaction. Eke provided a space to trade foodstuffs, products from palm trees, fish, and handmade goods. Women often had their own associations and from the networks generated at Eke, Avuvu also exchanged products with neighboring settlements. Craft and the products of the forest additionally provided sources of income for Avuvu. Woodworking was carried out; basketry was done as well as the making of pottery. A respected profession in the community was the work of Dibia or healers, who drew on medicinal plants and bark from the forest to provide a source of medicine and income, though the role of traditional doctors in Avuvu began to diminish as the use of western medicine increased.⁴⁰

In economic organization in Avuvu, the age grade system played a vital role in the co-ordination of labor for such community projects as farming, the clearing of roads and the construction of new buildings and for rendering community assistance to widows, the aged and the infirm during the planting and harvesting season. The Nigerian Biafra War, which started in 1967 and ended in 1970, dealt a fatal blow to these activities; farming was interrupted, markets collapsed and hunger became the order of the day. In these circumstances, both the age grade and the extended family rallied round the community, collectively produced food and shared it amongst themselves and after the war worked together to restore the devastated community. With the advent of western education in the early 1970's, other spheres of occupations were gradually thrown open, with young educated people going into government as clerk, in other places into teaching profession and others in Owerri and its environment. Those who had moved to the urban centers remained economically connected to their rural community by remittances to their families and other contributions to community development projects. Thus, by the close of the period 1964-74, the Avuvu economy was complex, localized and remarkably resilient, the age grade system providing the economic structure that held together community members in the face of war and modern changes.⁴¹

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Oparaocha, c65 years, Construction worker; interviewed at Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt, 15 March 2026.
2. Chile Oparaocha, c66 years, Retired lecturer/Teacher; interviewed at Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt, 15 March 2026.
3. Victor Oparaocha, c70 years, Community Elder/Farmer; interviewed at Avuvu, 14 March 2026.
4. V. Oparaocha, interview.
5. V. Oparaocha, interview.
6. C. Oparaocha, interview.
7. O.C.A. Anidi, et al., *Abor Iyime Awubu: Origin, History, Customs and Traditions of the Abor Igbo People of Enugu State, Nigeria* (Enugu: Abor Iyeme Awubu Club, 2026), 2.
8. NAE, Owerri Provincial Office Files, 1907–1956.
9. Augustine Opara, c65 years, Catechist; interviewed at Owuala Avuvu, 4 June 2026.
10. Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 11–12.
11. B.C. Anoshie, A.M. Okorobia, and S.I. Okoroafor, "Ikeduru and Her Neighbours during Nigeria's Civil War," *Icheke Journal* 12, no. 2 (2021): 45–62.
12. P. Oparaocha, interview.
13. C. Oparaocha, interview.
14. V. Oparaocha, interview.
15. V. Oparaocha, interview.
16. Felix Anukwu, c73 years, Trader; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, 19 March 2026.

17. Jude Iwuagwu, c62 years, Civil servant; interviewed at Iho, Ikeduru, 20 May 2026.
18. C. Oparaocha, interview.
19. I.J. Opara, C.C. Ezikeudu, C. Okorie et al., "The Quest for Community Development in Nigeria: An Interrogation of Autonomous Community System's Contributions towards Rural Electrification in Ikeduru Local Government Area," *Journal of Rural and Community Development* (2024).
20. V. Oparaocha, interview.
21. C. Oparaocha, interview.
22. V. Oparaocha, interview.
23. C. Oparaocha, interview.
24. P. Oparaocha, interview.
25. C. Oparaocha, interview.
26. V. Oparaocha, interview.
27. V. Oparaocha, interview.
28. C. Oparaocha, interview.
29. Justina Oparaocha, c85 years, Retired Accountant; interviewed at Umudei, Avuvu, Ikeduru, 10 February 2026.
30. P. Oparaocha, interview.
31. C. Oparaocha, interview.
32. V. Oparaocha, interview; account corroborated by community members during fieldwork in Avuvu.
33. V. Oparaocha, interview.
34. V. Oparaocha, interview.

35. V. Oparaocha, interview.
36. P. Oparaocha, interview.
37. V. Oparaocha, interview.
38. P. Oparaocha, interview.
39. C. Oparaocha, interview.
40. V. Oparaocha, interview.
41. V. Oparaocha, interview.

CHAPTER THREE

AGE GRADE SYSTEM IN AVUVU, IKEDURU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, IMO STATE 1964–1969

3.1 Structure and Formation of Age Grades

Age grade system is one of the vital institutions of social organization and community administration in Avuvu during the period 1964 – 1969. Age grade is a collective identity provided for people who fall into similar age range to form into an organized group by the community. Participation in these age groups is usually by age, development and maturity of individuals who are accepted as full member into communal activities by rites and ceremonies, each age grade had her identity, leadership and communal duty which make up the overall social, political and economic fabric of the Avuvu.¹

Avuvu's initiation of age-groups was also based on its tradition and communal beliefs. Certain of its sons who came of age were introduced to groups of age-mates, who formed enduring community units until the death of its members. These initiations, normally done communally through the instructions given by elders during the participation of its members in cultural ceremonies and initiations marking their transition to adulthood and responsibility, would be imparted with the moral values and importance of discipline and adherence to communal ideology and principles. These common rites also brought about cohesion and solidarity as all initiates were made to experience similar things. This process assured a seamless transmission of culture and tradition from one generation to another.²

In addition to their organizational functions, age grades in Avuvu community were often identified by symbolic names that reflected the ideals, aspirations, and historical experiences of their members. These names served as expressions of collective identity and reminded members of the values expected of them. Among the Igbo, examples of such symbolic names include Igwebuike ("strength is in unity"), Mmekoka ("togetherness is better"), Udoka ("peace is better"), and Ogwuebigo ("war has ended"). These names embodied principles of solidarity, mutual assistance, peaceful coexistence, resilience, and communal responsibility, which guided members in carrying out communal duties. Although the specific historical names of the age grades that existed in Avuvu between 1964 and 1974 were not preserved in the oral sources

consulted for this study, the adoption of symbolic names was a common feature of age-grade organizations across many Igbo communities and reflected the importance attached to unity, collective development, and the preservation of communal values.³ In the age-grade system, leaders were structured hierarchically. A particular group would elect individuals to serve as leaders of their group, organizing meetings, supervising communal work and representing their members during village meetings. The people appointed to the position of leaders did so as a result of some of their traits such as their ability to demonstrate wisdom, hard work, bravery and good morals. They were responsible for ensuring discipline and that all their group members carried out their duties. Members took decisions on group matters in conjunction with each other in an orderly and discussions-based manner.

The age grade system in Avuvu, also, underlined the collective nature of traditional Igbo community as group members were expected to help themselves during their farming exercise, marriages, burials and other activities of life. Through this interaction and helping each other, age grades helped to enhance social cohesion and integrate community in Avuvu as young members acquire social skills and practical knowledge by living in harmony with older members of their groups and consequently build strong group consciousness and identity among individuals, thereby fostering stability of social life in Avuvu at that time.⁴

The pattern of age grades also differs between the sexes and social duties of the members in the community. Men's age groups' activities tend to center on working of public works, defense, public security, enforcement of social norms in community. Women age groups are found primarily interested in public welfare, market, market associations, and social activities and rituals in community development as well. Even if the politics is to a great extent ruled by men, women groups helped to shape social structure, maintain social harmony and support activities to communal development in Avuvu.⁵

The age grade system in Avuvu was an indispensable element of economic, religious and political spheres in Avuvu during 1964-1969. The Avuvu people were primarily subsistent economy that relied on agriculture and products of palm trees and indigenous trade for its livelihood in that period. The age grade helped to mobilize communal labor for tilling of soil, planting, tiding the pathways in the village and building public facilities in the village. The

contributions of its members helped to boost the economy of the area and fostered better relation among members and develop spirit of self-reliance through cooperation in farming.⁶

Educational proliferation Ikeduru experienced in 1960's also extended its effects to age grade structures, systems and formation in Avuvu. For instance, the proliferation of such schools as the Avuvu Boys Secondary School and Community School Avuvu has contributed to familiarization of younger generations with western education and ideas.⁷ Educated youths increasingly found themselves blending activities within age grades with the new concepts of organization and leadership style. Furthermore, schooling, it helped foster the spirit of literacy amongst, in large measure expanded the mental horizons of quite a few numbers of Avuvu's young people, even as it continued to be in close alliance with their local identities, and indigenous values, to continue its role in the society.

Religious views of Avuvu at this time affected the organization of the age grades. Indigenous religious concepts affected how initiation ceremonies took place, the kinds of oaths men took, and social obligations related to the age grade. The membership engaged in public feasts, parades, masks and rituals pertaining to ancestors, and other community religious rites. It enhanced discipline in the age grades since men feared the society and the gods. As from the 1960s with the coming of Christianity, many elements associated with the indigenous religion in the age grade was being put into question by Christians who while engaged in the community project undertaken by their age grades disdained those rituals associated with indigenous religion.⁸

In Nigeria, the Biafran War that commenced in 1967 also had an impact on the form and functions of age grades in Avuvu. The war gave greater prominence to age grades which became indispensable source of protection, communal sharing and security in a turbulent war era. Ikeduru local government historical report reveals that this was not only a period of economic hardship for numerous households and communities in the area but that it also saw some reconstruction or rather⁹, redeployment of societal institutions in many communities which included age grades which offered help to displaced households in times of crisis during the war period. Therefore, it may be said that the war experience has reinforced comradeship between different age grades in Avuvu.

Finally, in summary, the organizational form and function of the Avuvu age grade between 1964 and 1969 represented an articulation of the values, and traditions of Igbo life within the social structure and, how as part of a comprehensive system the members were socialized into the community and initiated into a system of communal and social responsibility within that community. All the functions of the system including leadership, the role of religion in its functioning and operations and the importance of economy and education shaped and influenced the nature of this group of men. Although modernization and the Biafran War exerted considerable influence, yet the institution survived as a vital element in the Avuvu social life and its tenacity signifies its role in the preservation of social stability and continuity within the society.

3.2 Functions of Age Grades in Community Development

During 1964-1969 age grades in Avuvu served critical purposes to further the process of community development and advancement. They represented the organizational structure within which its members participated in enhancing community welfare by collective work and social assistance. The development projects undertaken, ranging from repair of road maintenance, cleansing market spaces, constructing village community halls to the task of keeping the environment clean and orderly were primarily executed by members of the various age grades who are mobilized, on a regular basis to fulfil this duty as well as discharge community obligations. Their communality enhanced self-help and reduced reliance on outside aid and in so many ways the age grade institution became key to development in Avuvu.¹⁰

This was an

Maintenance of roads and footpaths was another important role played by age grade associations in Avuvu. In fact, prior to government interventions in the construction of rural infrastructure, communal road construction and maintenance was usually undertaken by age grades and village assemblies. The community members would undertake the maintenance of community roads by clearing away the overgrown bushes and removing any debris to keep the paths and the accessways open. These roads enhanced trade and communication and also provided an avenue for the conveyance of goods to and from their own communities and neighboring ones of Ikeduru LGA and beyond. Therefore, such activities had great positive impacts on the

socioeconomic development of the area by encouraging economic exchange and community unity. These activities revealed how dedicated the people were to the development and collective well-being of their community.¹²

Age grades also played important roles in organizing festivals and ceremonies in Avuvu society. Traditional ceremonies such as the New Yam Festival (Iriji) and Mmanwu celebrations required collective efforts and participation. Age grade members assisted in preparing festival sites, organizing masquerade performances, maintaining order during festival periods, and entertaining guests at community gatherings. In the process, age grades facilitated the maintenance of cultural identity among Avuvu people and thereby the continuation of social ties in the society. Festivals helped to cement communal ties, and facilitated social interaction among individuals, and reinforced collective consciousness. Age grade participation therefore did contribute to cultural development of Avuvu people not only physically but also culturally.¹³

Communal work and age grade associations were of paramount significance in boosting education in Avuvu in the 1960's. A key outcome of the influence of education in Avuvu was the proliferation of educational establishments in the locale. Education like Avuvu Boys Secondary School and the Community School Avuvu were a testament to the rise in value attached to Western education in Avuvu.¹⁴ Communities in Avuvu especially age grades also played a vital role in community mobilization and construction of schools, by contributing to the erection of buildings, and providing classrooms and furnishing. It was also common for parents, youth associations to pull together funds and manpower for construction of classroom, furniture and providing books and other learning resources for local schools. This activity clearly depicted the community's realization of the potential of education as an instrument of both social and economic development. Age grade also became significant to the development of education as this was a time of expansion in educational activities in Avuvu.

Also, as it concerns community members health, Avuvu age grade could be argued also catered to it in a general sense too. As mentioned before in Avuvu in the 1960s and generally the countryside then and the era in general relied a lot on community co-operation when dealing with their environmental well-being. Age grades, thus, organized sanitation campaign along the stream sides, around the markets, in the roadsides, and compounds to ensure communal

cleanliness of the environment that would limit cases of endemic diseases and as such improve public health among the Avuvu people. The erection of a health post (Avuvu Health Post), again was another sign of increasing public health consciousness in Avuvu, and as it seems in Ikeduru L.G.A¹⁵ as whole which would come through the same level of communal participation.

Protection of communal properties security, communal peace in Avuvu from 1964 to 1969 This is another functional aspect of the age grade system. Youngsters, when incorporated into age grades, generally served as vigilantes' groups who protected the society and ensured its safety from crime and unrest. Similar patterns have been reported from researches on crime prevention in the past; thus, according to an inquiry on crimes control in Ikeduru; "vigilante age grades and aggressive youth associations were major instruments for the enforcement of law and order in a traditional society such as that in Ikeduru". As described by the respondent of the survey on the function of age grade system in Ikeduru, "they kept night patrol of our village in order to check criminal activities and ensure compliance with communal laws. They also played roles in the settlement of minor dispute along with elders".¹⁶ Thus, the security service by the age grade provided for relative peace and stability of the society at this time in the face of political instability in the country.

The Nigerian Biafran War heightened these developmental tasks of age-grade groups within the Avuvu community between 1967 and 1969. During the war, age-grade associations initiated a system of community solidarity for the care of refugees, distribution of food supplies and protection of property. The members provided the necessary labor and resources for the survival of the community during the challenging years of the conflict. Age grades members helped to restore their destroyed villages and communities, rebuild damaged buildings and re-establish a new community of social and economic relationships.¹⁷

In addition to communal development work, age grades built a sense of leadership and civic responsibility in the young members of Avuvu. The engagement in communal development projects taught them organization, cooperation and the need to help others in the community. Sacrifice, discipline and the ability to contribute effectively for the collective well-being of the community became the hallmarks of a developing age mate, which prepared them for effective

leadership of the society in the future. Hence, age grades did not only provide development for the community, but also equipped youth to contribute positively.¹⁸

The study concludes that age grades played various roles in the development process of Avuvu between 1964 and 1969. By working collectively in community projects such as the cultivation of fields and the construction of roads, participating in various communal enterprises and engaging in a wide range of activities to improve health, provide education and assist in providing security, age grades contributed to the welfare of the community. The activities undertaken by the age grades attest to the communal outlook and collective philosophy of the traditional Igbo society that "development is an all the time activity, and nobody is excluded". Given the impact of modernity and the volatile political atmosphere that marked the period, age grades continued to serve as a mobilizing agency for social and community development.

3.3 Role of Age Grades in Social Control and Discipline

The roles of Age Grades The age grades served as a tool for enforcing discipline, cohesion and for controlling and maintaining social order in Avuvu between the period of 1964 and 1969. Igbo society as stated, believed in the importance of morality and good conduct, that every person in the society should abide by the rules of the community and obey elders. Age groups were an effective institution in controlling the behavior and conduct of individuals in the society; they were made to protect the good name and traditions of the community. Any member who breaks the tradition or act against the custom of the community was disciplined by his age mates or the authority who collaborates with their age grade. They were made for the sake of enforcing order and control of the people in the community.¹⁹

Another of the most important functions carried out by the age grade was that of the execution of village rules and regulations. Age grade members watched the carrying out of rules about clean village, borders of fields, behavior in the marketplace, or joining communal activities, and the punishment of fines or public rebukes would follow disobedience to community customs and refusals to help the group. This made for easier compliance and would put an end to most any bad behaviors, because the age grade functions like an extended hand of the village to promote obedience to its laws.²⁰

There were also age-grade patrol units which were assigned roles of ensuring the security of lives and property in the village of Avuvu. Young males in the village formed patrol bands that kept vigil of any suspect persons in the villages especially at night and in occasions like festivals. The works on traditional modes of criminal justice and crime prevention in Ikeduru suggested that among other, age-grade vigilante groups and the militant youth groups were primary instrument of social control in the society, as they usually assisted the elders to apprehend wrongdoers, discourage offenses such as robbery, riot, destruction of communal resources, and to put potential offender in awe.²¹

Dispute Resolution Mediation for disputes of this nature for a long time within the Avuvu was among the functions which age grade carried out. The members acted as mediaries in minor disputes of young people and families as well as in disputes regarding collective duties. They tried to seek peaceful settlements so that disputes did not break into violence, which would lead to the disorganization of the group. In certain cases, the age grades collaborated with the Council of Elders in solving major conflicts of the entire village. The aspect of participation of the age grades in disputes solution was indeed a testament of the communality of justice system in the Igbo traditional life. By Mediation, peace and harmony are kept within the people.²²

Discipline: The institution instilled discipline in younger generation, through moral instruction and social interaction. In their regular meetings and general assembly, the age grade encouraged the youths on the need to be upright, truthful, hard work and obedient to the will of the community elders and leaders. Unbecoming characters such as stealing, disrespect to elders or unruly behavior, the discipline member(s) faced sanctions aimed to dissuade from such behaviors. Through the age grade system of Avuvu community was an informal education. Disciplined and moral behavior helped the institution to protect its morality in the community of 1960.²³

Religion also assisted in the role of age grades as mechanisms of discipline in Avuvu society. The established religion also stressed on the existence of various forces and agents in the universe who were supposed to act against people, who did not follow certain societal regulations or traditional principles and traditions. Various kinds of religious sanctions, for example, oaths and sacrifices, and oaths and rites, were applied in enforcing truth and honesty

among the communities. The age grade members believed that violation of rules could invite punishment not only from the society, but even from their deceased ancestors and from the gods and the goddesses. Thus, the community also derived power from their religious beliefs to enforce obedience among their people.²⁴

In 1960s, with the coming in of Christianity there were changes in age grades forms of control within the society. Christianity has teachings against certain ceremonies and sanctions of local institutions. But some converts also took part in those age grades events connected with community building and social control. Religious teachings in the church on proper conduct, honesty and obedient also had been similar with traditional age grade expectations. Thus, it can be argued that, both age grade and church institutions also took the role of enforcing discipline on members of society during the transitional period.²⁵

Disciplinary functions of Age-grades in Avuvu The modern educational system also impact on the role of the Age-grades. The schools that were founded in Ikeduru such as Avuvu Boys Secondary School and Community School Avuvu, enabled people particularly, younger ones to have an understanding of the formal and legal system of punishments. While many educated elites now question some of the brutal aspect of traditional forms of punishment and advocate for a more formal system of the communal punishment, Age-grade institution did not just die, for, at local level it still afforded communities the opportunities for an organized system of collective ordering and social order.²⁶

The Biafran War of 1967 and 1969 was yet another avenue which enhanced the place of age grades in the maintenance of law and order in Avuvu. Communities suffered in security, dislocation and deprivation during the war. Age grades created local safety net, protected food sources, enforced law and order among refugees in their area. Age grades maintained communal laws on sharing of food items, provided guidance on how people can survive during war time through the co-ordination efforts of all and several other services which were to contribute to the relative peace within the community during the civil war.²⁷

Age grades are important elements in enforcing order and discipline in any given society. During the period 1964 – 1969, they have played significant role in preserving social order and stability of Avuvu society. These include, enforcement of social laws of the community, social vigilance,

settling social disputes, moral training and protection of the social welfare of the community. The religious belief system of the community and cultural values enhanced with traditional authority contributed to the success of the age grades in imposing behavioral control to their members. The spread of western religion and culture such as western education has influenced other social structures of the community but the traditional roles of the age grades in bringing social order and discipline remain prominent.

3.4 Interaction Between Age Grades and Colonial Administration

During 1964 to 1969, the relationship between age grades and the colonial administration in Avuvu illustrated the persistence of traditional forms even though the state had expanded to include the colonial bureaucracy. Although the period of colonial administration in Nigeria ended in 1960, many of the structures set up during the colonial period remained effective at the local level of places such as Avuvu. The age grades still continued to be used as vehicles for carrying out the community decisions and managing the affairs. Colonial officials recognized how age grades could be useful to extract labor, maintain order at the local level and the colonial state co-opted elements of the traditional age set institution as the local administration.²⁸

Prior to colonization the age grade system at Avuvu was in existence, working at their respective stages and under the authority of elders, and heads of lineage groups and as it functioned, it handled and saw to the performance of communal functions, the enforcement of communal and local rules as well as defense of communal security. The age grade systems also played a vital role in community administration when colonialism was introduced through warrant chiefs and native courts, with diminished power, authority and political jurisdiction. The age grade however still existed and functioned effectively at the local administrative level, often used by the colonials for information dispersal and implementation of community projects and directives.²⁹

During the colonial era and for a while after it, roads, village squares and markets in Avuvu were often maintained by members of the various age grades. This service came from the use of communal labor as a tool for rural development by the colonial state, and age grades came handy because they had a structured format which could easily rally the able-bodied young people to carry out the tasks. They worked under the leadership of their local government leaders to weed paths, clear up roads, fix up bridges and clear up refuse pits and the rest of the work in the

markets and the village center. The performance of this function of communal labor to some extent increased their visibility within the system of community government. It also increased community solidarity and the veneration of indigenous governance by its people.³⁰

Also, with colonial rule come the imposition of tax and census activities, which forced age grades to come closer to the authorities. The local rulers or elders within most of the age grade communities in Ikeduru make use of the age grade to survey the people/households for taxable persons and taxable household. The group's unity facilitate communication to the colonial masters, because of how the groups are set up, it was easier for age grade members to make pronouncement of meetings, enforce their attendance, and ensure adherence to communal policies. Though there were communities who opposed colonial government rule, age grade members often played mediator to reconcile both parties and maintain peaceful society.³¹

The issue of crime control was yet another significant aspect of age grade/colonial administrative interactions. Local security was maintained in the society using vigilante age grades and youth associations to help control crime and check immorality in the society. The writer also says the traditional Ikeduru society used age grades to play the role of social agents in the control of crime; in association with elders and family systems.³² As in Avuvu where they took watch over doubtful and suspected persons; defended and protected communal property; and inflicted punishment on transgressors as per customs, the administrative officers found these structures helpful in maintaining peace as it off loaded the responsibility from the modern security agents to the local authorities in rural settings.

The age-grade leadership styles also saw impacts as result of colonial administrative structures. In the traditional structure of age-grades the leadership was based on achievements, bravery and community respect, though some well-educated leaders who could speak English would often have an advantage when interacting with administration authorities which over the course of time, it was leading to emergence of educated leadership that sometimes began to have some advantages in the age grade, but the age-old practice was continued in that period.³³

Christian missionaries and schools and their influence Christian missions and the schools they established influenced the nature of interaction between the age grades and colonial officials. Most of the young people in Avuvu gained access to western concepts of social structure and

administration through schools managed by mission agents. Young people who had some level of western education sometimes challenged some aspects of age grade tradition such as rituals and secrecy. However, the organizational relevance of age grades was always accepted and at times schools and Churches worked together with the age grade for sanitation and community development in this area. The above indicates that age grade institution has been flexible and relevant in response to the dynamic social context of this era.³⁴

However, the impact of the Biafran War in Nigeria (1967-70) on the age grade-administrative authority relationship can also be explained by observing the effects of the war in Avuvu in Ikeduru Local Government. Avuvu, as in other communities in Ikeduru, underwent serious social dislocation and economic privation as a result of the civil war. Local communities sustained themselves through communal labor for food production and distribution and by the enforcement of social norms within their local systems of control. This pressure imposed by war conditions enhanced the function of traditional and informal structures as administrative authorities and security agencies. This was demonstrated by how they supported local populations, organized relief operations, and mobilized community self-help measures.³⁵

The fact that age grades persevered throughout this time illustrates the strength of indigenous institutions of governance among Igbo communities. In spite of the implantation of a modern administrative bureaucracy by the colonialists, native institutions could not be completely suppressed. Avuvu age grades retained the people's support for several reasons. Firstly, as indigenous social formations they were steeped in communal values and traditions. To be involved in them was perceived both as social responsibility as well as a responsibility to their ancestors and traditions. In this way, the age grades acted as facilitators and intermediaries between old and new societies, between the primordial society and the developing modern polity. This dual function gave added impetus and authority to the system during the 1964 and 1969 period.³⁶

By the late 1960's the relationship between the age grades and the administration had transformed from adversarial to cordial. The Local administration had come to appreciate the contribution that a community-based structure such as the age grade could play in rural development and the mobilization of its members. Age grades were also involved in public

projects, cultural activities and the administration of justice in community level. This greatly added to the efforts by the administration in the maintenance of order and community development. Though modern society has brought new social structures and institutions in Avuvu, the age grade has remained an integral part of the social system of the community. Thus, the interplay between traditional institutions and administrative structures resulted in continuity and dynamism in the social system of Avuvu community.³⁷

3.5 Impact of Christianity and Western Education on Age Grades

Christianity and western education The age grade system in Avuvu was again subjected to a lot of modification from 1964-1969 as a result of the introduction of Christianity and western education. Christian missionaries introduced to Avuvu, beliefs that brought about criticisms of some of the functions of the age grade. The age grades, in their ancestral ritualistic performances, with masked displays and traditional sacrifices and traditional sacrifices were seen by many new converts as not conforming with some tenets of Christianity. This however, did not lead to the abolition of the system, due to its role in socializing and promoting some functions which the members found relevant and therefore continue with them to varying degrees.³⁸

Another social transformation of Avuvu society was Western education. Education introduced in Ikeduru Local Government was modern, it taught young men about the outside world, it inculcated them in the art of writing and educated them for the purpose of jobs. Such educational centers such as Avuvu Boys Secondary School and Community School Avuvu served as agents of social change. The educated youths became to take after new styles that ran counter to the social systems in the communities. They formed voluntary organizations, age grade unions as substitute for the formal age grade systems. Still majority of the educated young men took part in the activities of the age grade since they form major means of identification in the community.³⁹

With the spread of Christianity some activities in Avuvu age grade structures became modified morally and spiritually. Prior to the arrival of Christianity many activities of age grades incorporated ancestral worship and traditional ceremonies. Those who became Christian considered some of these practices as anti-biblical and so such age grades lessened or abandoned these ritualistic engagements to allow Christian participants to continue.⁴⁰

They provided the impetus for change in age grade social organization. Young men who went to mission schools gained high status, especially the literacy associated with western schooling; they often occupied leadership positions in community groups. Their ability to read and write helped them establish and maintain relationships with colonial government administrators and the mission, so they mediated effectively with them on behalf of age groups and the community. Their exposure to western administrative methods provided a model for modern organizational practices: the maintenance of records, collection of funds from age grade members for collective purposes and more formalized and scheduled meetings, so enhancing the administrative capacity of the organization and its contribution to community projects.⁴¹

Christianization also fostered the development of alternative social organizations which were in competition with traditional structures. These church organizations include youth clubs, women societies and charitable groups to which many local inhabitants belonged. Some churches carried out some of the tasks which age grades carried out. Some of the functions they carried out includes helping each other in labor or in providing support to each other. This is reflected in the decline in age grade membership among certain sections of society. However, they continue to remain very relevant due to their connection with lineage and heritage. It is not uncommon for an individual to be part of both the traditional age grade and a church club.⁴²

Additionally Western education fostered increased individualism and career opportunities away from the community. Increasing numbers of the educated were opting for occupational migration to town centers and the various government establishments. Due to these migratory trends, there was a reduction in the available active community members in some of the age-grades. However, those outside the community, though away, provided financial aid to their age-grade members. The cultural occasions (festivals) and annual meetings were also an occasion for meeting. That the modernization had diluted some areas of this institution while in others it had fortified them through the new means of support indicated so.⁴³

Christianity indeed offered support to age grade associations in specific ways, for instance through stimulating the emphasis on self-discipline and cooperation, as well as fostering the idea of community services. Church leaders generally pushed people to undertake some services that help to uplift community members. Age grades would help with such things as church

constructions, school constructions, and sanitation within Avuvu town, for example. These services indicated an assimilation between Christian principles, and traditional community ethos of such social institutions like age grades. Instead of eliminating age grades as an institution, Christianity only redirected its priorities.⁴⁴

The impact of western education also resulted in different views on the participation of women and young people in communal matters. Western educated people started calling for wider involvement in communal decision-making processes. While the indigenous forms of age grades were largely made of male groups, the evolving social and economic circumstances prompted recognition to the relevance of women associations and youth groups in communities. Education brought together people from varied families and communities. It thus allowed for the establishment of broader associations than the kinship groups. These developments helped erode the influence of age grade institution in Avuvu communal activities, even if the elders' position continued to provide advice on communal activities.⁴⁵

However, despite the advent of Christianity and Western education, there still were elements of the age grade system that clung to the traditional practices and culture in Avuvu. The institution still furnished members with a sense of social identification, camaraderie, solidarity and collectively acted. For example, age grade system organized traditional ceremonies, provided help during funeral services and marriages, as well as engaged in community improvement initiatives. In an effort to protect its cultural practices for coming generations, Elders had to maintain aspects of age grade system. Consequently, modernity gave rise to adaptation instead of cultural alienation in Avuvu.⁴⁶

The Avuvu age grade system, in 1969 had transformed into a syncretic institution integrating the traditional with the imported modern traditions. Christian teachings minimized its ritualistic aspects and western education imparted new organizing systems and patterns of leadership. The primary aims of cooperative activity, social organization and reciprocal cooperation still persevered. This system persevered due to its successful accommodation with altered circumstances in the country. Age grade systems were still a vital force in Avuvu's socio-organization as a result of the intrusion of western society.⁴⁷

ENDNOTES

1. Emmanuel Nwosu, c68 years, Farmer; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 14 March 2025.
2. Chukwudi Emenike, c71 years, Retired Teacher; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 16 March 2025.
3. Victor Oparaocha, c70 years, Farmer; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 14 March 2026.
4. Augustine Opara, c65 years, Catechist; interviewed at Owuala Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 18 March 2025.
5. Chile Oparaocha, c66 years, Retired Teacher; interviewed at Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 15 March 2026.
6. Felix Anukwu, c73 years, Trader; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 19 March 2025.
7. Jude Iwuagwu, c62 years, Civil Servant; interviewed at Iho, Ikeduru, Imo State, 20 March 2025.
8. C. Oparaocha, interview.
9. J.O. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Control in Traditional Igbo Society: A Study of Ikeduru Community" (unpublished manuscript/field research paper, [Department], [University], [Year]), 22.
10. E. Nwosu, interview.
11. C. Emenike, interview.
12. V. Oparaocha, interview.
13. A. Opara, interview.
14. F. Anukwu, interview.

15. J. Iwuagwu, interview.
16. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 24.
17. V. Oparaocha, interview.
18. V. Oparaocha, interview.
19. E. Nwosu, interview.
20. C. Emenike, interview.
21. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 27.
22. V. Oparaocha, interview.
23. Peter Oparaocha, c65 years, Construction Worker; interviewed at Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 15 March 2026.
24. C. Oparaocha, interview.
25. A. Opara, interview.
26. F. Anukwu, interview.
27. C. Oparaocha, interview.
28. E. Nwosu, interview.
29. C. Emenike, interview.
30. A. Opara, interview.
31. F. Anukwu, interview.
32. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 22.
33. J. Iwuagwu, interview.
34. E. Nwosu, interview.

35. C. Emenike, interview.
36. A. Opara, interview.
37. F. Anukwu, interview.
38. J. Iwuagwu, interview.
39. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 24.
40. E. Nwosu, interview.
41. C. Emenike, interview.
42. A. Opara, interview.
43. F. Anukwu, interview.
44. J. Iwuagwu, interview.
45. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 27.
46. E. Nwosu, interview.
47. C. Emenike, interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

AGE GRADE SYSTEM IN AVUVU, IKEDURU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, IMO STATE 1969-1974

4.1 Transformation of Age Grade System in the Post-Colonial Era

The critical era, 1969 to 1974, therefore, represented a turning point in the restructuring of the age grade system. The end of the Nigerian Biafran War in January 1970 put on the agenda the physical reconstruction of the village, the rehabilitation of agriculture, and the reorganization of social institutions which had been adversely affected by the hostilities. The role of the age grades in survival and solidarity was therefore redeployed to reconstruction. The process was stimulated not only by the need to recover from war-induced dislocation, but more particularly by the pragmatic exigencies of post-war recovery and by the reintegration of returning migrant men and by the incremental extension of state and local government power throughout East-Central State which included Avuvu up to 1976.¹

Probably most important was that in this period, age grade status underwent a change from an emphasis on traditional or ritual and ceremonial duties towards one of practical and developmental focus. While the years up until 1969 saw much activity in the context of ancestral cults, initiation rites, masquerading, by the post war era there was increasing concern with the rebuilding of schools, the repair of markets and the re-establishment of roads which had suffered so badly in the war.² This is not to say that the cultural and spiritual functions of the institution simply vanish; rather they co-exist with a more and more developmental ideology responsive to the desperate material demands of the time.

The re-incorporation into the community, at the end of the war, of ex-servicemen and displaced persons to Avuvu led to a change in the makeup of and attitude towards the age grades. Many young men, who served in the war or had been displaced into another part of Igbo-land, returned from war with different outlook, changed experience and some were less ready to accept burdensome customary duties.³ Simultaneously the common survival experience helped build enduring solidarity ties among those of a shared age cohort thus further strengthening identity in the new social contexts to which the institution now adapted. Evidence also suggests that the

wartime solidarity of the age grades, the memory of their mutual experience of shared survival, often served as a powerful mobilizing tool to spur action for reconstruction, so that the same solidarity that mobilized age grades during the war era could be used as an instrument to advance the process of reconstruction after the war had ended.⁴

The further post-colonial modification of the age grade system of Avuvu was dictated by the fusion of the local government in Imo State that began with the formation of the state in 1976, as well as administrative restructuring prior to that. Even though the Ikeduru Local Government Area was established only in 1989, the period from 1969 to 1974 saw an expansion of divisional and regional governmental structures over communities such as Avuvu, thus forcing the indigenous institution to exist, in cooperation with, rather than separately from, the government system.⁵ To respond to this changing organizational world, the age grades put some of their arrangements into more definite and formal form, among other things developing systems of taking minutes for their meetings, recording donations, and making lists of their current activities - a process of documentation which had been very unusual indeed before the war.

Age grades also played a role in the reform process of this period. Age grades which had begun in the early 1970s had a high proportion of members whose primary and secondary schooling, some even up to Owerri and other town cities, have been to a certain extent exposed them to literacy and new trends that now permeates through their organization. The trend began to slowly effect and change the balance of powers within these age groups where younger members gained position of leadership as secretary, and treasurer, whereas, old members still occupied the conventional, ceremony positions of leader/ chairman of age group. Thus, the new synthesis of tradition leadership and bureaucratic and efficient way of operation characterized age grade organization in Avuvu in early 1970s.⁶

The development of the Avuvu age grade system from 1969 to 1974 illustrated, then, the more widespread fate of the Igboland institution of Age Grade system, or institution for war-recovery, post-war years of reconstruction and social adaptation, as they absorbed the strain of war and dispersal, while redirecting the scope and goals of the old organization to the practical exigencies of communal rehabilitation and adapting it to the changing circumstances brought about by war, literacy, and slow government encroachment.

4.2 Age Grades and the Nigerian Biafra war (1967–1970)

The Nigerian Biafra war, 1967–1970 brought significant changes to the responsibilities of age-grade associations in Avuvu. Although age grades traditionally performed communal labour, social control, cultural preservation, and development functions, the outbreak of the war compelled them to assume additional responsibilities related to security, survival, and humanitarian assistance. As Avuvu formed part of Ikeduru, which became an important hinterland during the conflict and received displaced persons from surrounding areas, age-grade associations adapted their activities to meet the demands of wartime conditions.⁷

The younger and able-bodied age grades constituted the most active segment during the war. Many young men were enlisted or voluntarily joined the Biafran armed forces, while those who remained in the community assisted in safeguarding the village. They guarded village boundaries and bush paths against possible enemy incursions, escorted traders and women travelling to neighbouring communities in search of food, and provided security along routes leading to streams and other vital sources of water. These activities helped reduce the vulnerability of the community and ensured the continued movement of people and essential supplies.⁸

The middle-aged age grades concentrated on sustaining community life despite the hardships of war. They organized communal labour, assisted in accommodating displaced families who sought refuge in Avuvu and neighbouring communities, and participated in the distribution of available food and relief materials. They also coordinated local vigilance during air raids, maintained order in temporary markets where barter replaced conventional trade, and worked with community leaders to ensure the equitable distribution of scarce resources.⁹

The elder age grades continued to provide leadership and stability during this difficult period. As custodians of customary law and communal values, they settled disputes arising from wartime pressures, mediated between community members and Biafran military authorities where necessary, and ensured that traditional burial rites and other important cultural practices were observed despite the disruptions caused by the conflict. Their leadership contributed greatly to preserving social cohesion and maintaining communal morale throughout the war.¹⁰

The Biafra War therefore demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of the age-grade institution in Avuvu. Rather than becoming inactive during the conflict, the various age grades adjusted their traditional responsibilities to meet the changing needs of the community. Their contributions to security, humanitarian assistance, conflict resolution, and social organization played a significant role in sustaining communal life during the war and in facilitating the reconstruction of Avuvu after the end of hostilities in 1970.

4.3 Contemporary Functions of Age Grades in Avuvu

Over the next five years (1969–74), however, the functions of age grades continued to widen in Avuvu far beyond the traditional functions of ritual and discipline; more and more the groups engaged themselves with community welfare, modern society and the management of resources. Underlying this widening of responsibilities, of course, the original communal and co-operative functions of the age grades, of work and help and the adjudication of disputes, never entirely died away but expanded into an ever more diverse realm as the island struggled to make good the ravages of the Second World War, the pace of which increased slowly in these years.¹¹

Perhaps the most salient modern use of age grades at this time was in mobilizing public welfare projects on behalf of the widows, orphans, and other dependents whom the Nigerian Biafran War left in society. Through regularly imposed contributions and public service, the age grade contributed to the needs of homes that had been deprived of their support in the civil war, a role, which indicated the spread of the organization of age grades beyond its welfare function.¹² In addition to the above welfare function there was also ongoing cooperation on the farming occasions, marriages and funerals of members, part of a more informal custom of reciprocity within membership.

During this era, age grades also played an increasingly significant role as institutions of revenue-mobilization and financial-pooling. They initiated levies and collection of contributions and community work in those projects that needed more capital than a family could generate on its own. Those who reside outside Avuvu, especially those in Owerri and Port Harcourt and many other urban centers were compelled to invest cash in works their age grades execute in the rural areas. This practice re-affirmed the relationship between the Avuvu community and their

population that had moved into urban centers.¹³ This was in turn converted some age groups into semi-official organizations with regular meetings, membership lists and fixed contributions.

They had retained a significant role in the celebration of cultural ceremonies and festivals such as New Yam Festival, and others based on the agricultural calendar. It was important at this time that the mask of the Ekeala reappeared in 1974 and the Eke Ala festival which began thereafter, has also as the age grades as the organizer and provided for labor and security in its organization as a festive ceremony.¹⁴ This ritual included age grades, thereby demonstrating the institution's continued role in the spiritual and social life of the village in a period when its developmental and educational functions were becoming ever more pronounced.

Other contemporary functions of age grades were security and social control. Even at the turn of the 1970s these concerns were certainly salient in Avuvu. In fact, some lingering insecurity in the years immediately after the war may have also played some role in maintaining the continued activity of the youngest age grades. It should be noted that at this time, even these young groups often engaged in policing the community (especially during dances or other events and also on night patrol) and they served to help elders and family heads when needed to keep the peace and bring the guilty to justice.¹⁵ This security measure operated alongside rather than as a rival to the increasing scope of formal police and the local administrative power in Ikeduru.

All in all, the contemporary roles played by age grades in Avuvu during 1969-74 suggest a structure that had diversified far more widely since before the war to incorporate traditional welfare, ceremonial and security roles with novel roles focused upon fundraising, post-war assistance, and serving an increasingly mobile and urbanized population. It is upon this development in roles that the system continued to thrive, adapt, and survive.

4.4 Age Grades and Community Development Projects

Community development was one of the most evident spheres of activity by age grades in Avuvu during this period. Considerable effort was made towards recovering from the Civil War, which was an area where age grade solidarity in this sense manifested itself strongly. For example, age grades mobilized men in for communal labor towards reconstruction work to replace roads, bridges and market stalls which had fallen into disrepair or were destroyed during the War in order to re-establish local facilities necessary for agriculture and trade.¹⁶ Reconstruction

activities were often directed by the assembly or the elders' committee, using manpower recruited through age grades.

Educational institutions were specially targeted by the age grades during these years due to increased appreciation of the status of western education as a path to development (socio and economic) Members of age grades supplied labor and materials for repair and reconstruction of school infrastructure including: Avuvu Boys secondary school and Community school Avuvu which experienced periods of closures and damages during the war.¹⁷ Additionally, age grades provided help in furniture, the weeding of school compounds, and, on certain occasions, help to raise funds to support teachers' salary in this trying period of post war years when government has been very conservative to subsidize the salaries for schools in the rural communities.

Health center construction, upgrade and maintenance of existing facilities formed part of these development activities carried out by age grade age grade age grades for some members, age group members age group, age grades as the case may be. Facilities such as Avuvu Health Post were renovated and expanded through voluntary labor, age grade groupage grade age group; age grades would at intervals carry out sanitation around streams, wells, residential and house premises as a measure of disease control, which was made even more imperative by the war-ravaged environmental conditions.¹⁸ Such activities relating to the health sector exemplify the extended meaning of community development prevalent in age grade activity in the early 1970s to incorporate public health and social welfare.

The age grades were particularly involved in developing the infrastructure for trade since the whole community perceived trade as essential for post-war economic revival. The repairs to the Eke market, and the building of further stalls were carried out to a considerable extent by age grade labor on community development projects, in alliance with the trading association and the elders council.¹⁹ These collaborative endeavors of the age grades and other social institutions in realizing common development goals were a clear demonstration of the ability of indigenous organization to coordinate collective actions, despite the low level of investment in rural infrastructure on the part of the government.

Competitive activity between the age grades-a historic dimension of the Avuvu institution-still served as motivation for development activity. The age grades competed to accomplish larger

and better community projects, and any of the community-wide projects successfully completed enhanced the status of the age grade group which achieved this.²⁰ This competitive activity directed into development ensured the flow of labor and other resources for projects which the community would otherwise be too poor to consider.

On balance, the community development work initiated by the age-grade associations from 1969 to 1974 clearly highlights how critical age-grades were to the material well-being of Avuvu at a time when government financial and technical assistance to rural areas was limited. By means of organized labor, money donations and the reward of rivalry, the age-grade associations contributed most of the manpower and organizational input necessary for the restoration of Avuvu to prewar status and for its development since then.

4.5 Influence of Urbanization, Migration and Modern Education

There was an increased rate of urbanization and migration between 1969 and 1974 that profoundly affected the age grade system and social organization of Avuvu. Increased opportunities within Owerri, Port Harcourt and other urban centers, as well as the trauma of the War made the mobility of young men from Avuvu in pursuit of education, work and trade, outside the community²¹ a constant and widespread trend. The departure of a large part of the population from the village weakened the age grade with its attendant effect on communal work, and gave rise to a dispersed population maintaining connections with their home base.

The relationship between members of migrant age grades of Avuvu and their home village was facilitated by intermittent return to the village, cash transfers from members in the towns, as well as an engagement in yearly get-togethers and celebrations timed with the visits of members in the period of Christmas and other holidays.²² Gradually this trans local and sporadic link with the home village expanded the scale of activities of certain age grades to the towns in which the members were settled thus establishing trans local organizations that served the members in both villages and towns which became part of the overall trend among Igbo migrants in the post-Biafran War period.

Modern schooling contributed at least as strongly to this reform during the period. As an ever-greater number of youth in Avuvu received their elementary and then secondary schooling, schools were providing their constituents with notions about organization, administration, and

command that seeped into the practice of age-grades in the form of increased writing of minutes, membership registers, and letters by the various organizations which started up in the early 1970s.²³ Furthermore, many educated members began to scrutinize a number of customs which they thought to be behind the times, though many continued to endorse the social and educational value of the group.

Leadership and status became redefined not simply as the consequence of the processes of age graded interaction, however, as well as of the spread of urbanization and education. The attributes by which one's status within age graded associations was determined continued to emphasize the virtues and powers, both physical and oratorical, of age and seniority, yet in the early 1970s an additional source of authority and prestige was found in the gaining of formal education or of a stable career in urban occupation.²⁴ There was not a substitution for old modes of status, but rather an added dimension in a layered more complex hierarchy of leadership within age grades.

Although this was the centrifugal effects of migration, the Avuvu age grade institution proved relatively resistant during this time; in part because the institution still functioned as a symbol of group identity and ancestry that migration could not readily destroy. Migrants settling in urban centers commonly participated in or established age-grade unions in their new locations, mirroring many features of the institution in another locale, while remaining true to its nature, thereby facilitating the flow of remittances and project donations back to Avuvu, and ultimately keeping the ties between migrant and community intact.²⁵

In conclusion, urbanization, migration, and the expansion of modern education between 1969 and 1974 introduced significant changes to the age grade system in Avuvu, altering its composition, leadership patterns, and geographical scope. Rather than weakening the institution, these forces produced a more dispersed but no less committed membership,²⁶ whose continued attachment to the age grade system ensured the steady flow of resources, ideas, and labour required for the ongoing development of the community.

ENDNOTES

1. Emmanuel Nwosu, c68 years, Farmer; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 14 March 2026.
2. Chukwudi Emenike, c71 years, Retired Teacher; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 16 March 2026.
3. B.C. Anoshie, A.M. Okorobia and S.I. Okoroafor, "Ikeduru and Her Neighbours during Nigeria's Civil War," *Icheke Journal* 12, no. 2 (2021): 45–62.
4. Augustine Opara, c65 years, Catechist; interviewed at Owuala Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 18 March 2026.
5. Chile Oparaocha, c66 years, Retired Teacher; interviewed at Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 15 March 2026.
6. Felix Anukwu, c73 years, Trader; interviewed at Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State, 19 March 2026.
7. Jude Iwuagwu, c62 years, Civil Servant; interviewed at Iho, Ikeduru, Imo State, 20 March 2026.
8. C. Oparaocha, interview.
9. J.O. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Control in Traditional Igbo Society: A Study of Ikeduru Community" (unpublished manuscript/field research paper, [Department], [University], [Year]), 22.
10. E. Nwosu, interview.
11. C. Emenike, interview.
12. V. Oparaocha, interview.
13. A. Opara, interview.
14. F. Anukwu, interview.

15. J. Iwuagwu, interview.
16. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 24.
17. V. Oparaocha, interview.
18. V. Oparaocha, interview.
19. E. Nwosu, interview.
20. C. Emenike, interview.
21. Onwuliri, "Method of Social Crime Control," 27.
22. V. Oparaocha, interview.
23. V. Oparaocha, interview.
24. V. Oparaocha, interview.
25. C. Oparaocha, interview.
26. Peter Oparaocha, c65 years, Construction Worker; interviewed at Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 15 March 2026.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary

1974, a time of radical social, political, and economic change in southeastern Nigeria. Analysis of available evidence demonstrates that the age grade system was the skeletal organization of the society, underlying, and shaping the mechanisms of labor organization, adjudication, security, and intergenerational value transmission. Political authority was centered in a decentralized, essentially democratic polity of age grade councils, councils of elders and of title men responsible for keeping the peace and settling disputes over land and social affairs by adjudication based on customary law. The underlying political system was maintained by native religion centered in oral accounts of the Ekeala mask which undergirds governance and social order by framing it within a spiritual context and that of group memory.

Although the Biafra war was the dominant force of disruption of the time it is clear from the research that the disruptions brought by the War including its disruption to local markets, the disruption to farming and the dispersal of families did not destroy the age grades of Avuvu, it encouraged their re-organization; they were used to facilitate food production, to cater for those whose parents died during the war and women generally and to organize the rebuilding effort of Avuvu after the War.

During the early 1970's outward migration increased as did western education as young educated people took up work places elsewhere and those who left Avuvu to go to the towns maintained their connection with the community through remittances and contributions to local projects. These events encouraged the gradual change of the age grade system, by 1974 the age grade system was still a significant feature of organization in Avuvu and was starting to change with the new post war, post-colonial social system.

The structure, functioning, and problems of the age grade system in Avuvu from 1964-69 are discussed in a setting marked by both the hope of the immediate post-independence years and the horror of the Nigerian Biafra war. The analysis shows that in the latter half of the decade age grades served as instruments of social control, communal development and reciprocal aid while

illustrating how some customary practices in Avuvu began to give way to the penetration of the world that the new Christianity, western education and continuing colonial influence (after 1960) brought in their wake. During the years 1969-74 the age grade system of Avuvu responded imaginatively to post war rehabilitation needs. This period witnessed the increased diversification of age grade roles, with the provision of welfare support for war devastated households and the organization of fund-raising and remittance networks for town-based Avuvans to provide aid back in their village. While increased urbanization and the availability of formal education attracted an increasing number of young Avuvans away from their home, rather than undermining the age grade system this caused it to adjust and provide a coordination role for migrant welfare networks and development schemes.

Over the years in Avuvu the age-grade system proved to be a stubborn and persistent as well as an enduring as well as an adaptable institution that proved able to take in its stride the disruptions of colonial invasion and religion; war and the processes of development. A series of successive pieces of testimony from elders, as well as contemporary documentary sources (secondary or archived) confirmed this account.

5.2 Conclusion

It is clear from the research carried out in this project that age grade groupings were one of the most critical institutions of social organization in Avuvu, during 1964–74; its social roles extending well beyond the more obvious associations that one may associate with such institutions. In so far as it was a tool for labor mobilization, it formed the structure enabling the construction and upkeep of roads, market, schools, and health centers in an era of under-investment by the government in rural infrastructure. In its capacity as an institution of social control, it augmented the powers of the council of elders in enforcing social order, settling disputes and upholding community rules. In terms of cultural continuation it was an avenue for maintaining many aspects of community life such as festivals, ceremonies and the traditions including that connected with the Ekeala masks that defined Avuvu's sense of self during a decade of change.

The research has shown also that age grades in Avuvu was not an ossified institution, rigidly imbedded in tradition, but an adaptive institution that could respond to shifting historical

circumstances. Colonialism, Christianity and western education, the scars of the Nigerian Biafra war, and finally the strain of urbanization and migration, each confronted the institution with its unique problem but on each occasion age grades were able to adjust their organizational patterns, their focus and mode of activity while still maintaining their fundamental purpose as agencies of communal cohesion and advancement.

This tenacity is of much wider interest to the broader issues relating to the study of African post-colonial, indigenous institutions. Rather than considering tradition as being intrinsically antagonistic to the agents of change, it seems that as in the case of the Avuvu age grade system, these indigenous forms of organization can offer a degree of resilience and flexibility which are the basis for navigating change between tradition and change; providing for continuity of community even though age-set members have left, been westernized and are integrated into contemporary bureaucratic systems. These observations reflect and contribute to, the recent corpus of academic literature on continuity of indigenous social organization within both Igbo society, and for post-colonial Africa more generally.

Following these findings the research calls for a more concerted research effort towards documenting age grade and other related institutions found in other communities within Ikeduru Local Government and by extension, Imo State. Most of these are still underdeveloped even though they hold a high level of socio-cultural significance today. It recommends that community leaders, rulers, community-based associations, state and local governments should, at their own levels take a proactive stance in formalizing, supporting and documenting the work of age grades that have been found to mobilize community resources with a less than average investment from the state in order to develop their respective communities. Lastly the research calls for a more proactive effort at systematically archiving the traditions and oral histories of indigenous ritual objects such as the Ekeala mask that still persist because they live on in the minds of old people who are steadily dying off.

This study has set a historical account of the operation of the age grade system and social structure in Avuvu between 1964 and 1974. thus, it was able to bridge an identified hiatus in Igbo studies of social institutions, and further the argument that indigenous institutions of community organization were able to negotiate with post-colonial realities shaped by the colonial

past, Biafran War and the forces of modernization in post-colonial southeastern Nigeria. The endurance of the age grade system in Avuvu today serves as testimony to the fact that indigenous social institutions may prove quite resilient and adaptive to the processes of social and historical change.

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Emenike, Chukwudi	71	Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State	Retired Teacher	16/3/2025	Direct	Reliable
Iwuagwu, Jude	62	Iho, Ikeduru, Imo State	Civil Servant	20/3/2025	Direct	Reliable
Nwosu, Emmanuel	68	Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State	Farmer	14/3/2025	Direct	Reliable
Opara, Augustine	65	Owuala Avuvu, Ikeduru, Imo State	Catechist	18/3/2025	Direct	Reliable
Oparaocha, Chile	66	Rumuigbo	Retired Lecturer/Teacher	15/3/2026	Direct	Reliable
Oparaocha, Justina	85	Umudei, Avuvu, Ikeduru	Retired Accountant	10/2/2026	Direct	Reliable
Oparaocha, Peter	65	Rumuigbo, Port Harcourt	Construction Worker	15/3/2026	Direct	Reliable
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